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ABSTRACT

Decontextualization, referring to the abstraction of a written text from all of its contexts, is a flawed concept. Rather than viewing writing as an isolated abstraction, a text's involvement with the human world should be acknowledged. Two major questions arise when dealing with the concept of decontextualization: (1) Can written discourse be rendered meaningful context-free? and (2) Is the locus of meaning solely within the text? Several types of context are involved in written discourse--linguistic, situational, cultural, and textual. To consider language as decontextualized means to consider it removed from the totality of its contexts, a theoretically impossible isolation. In addition, the five components of written discourse--writer, content, reader, meaning, and intertextuality--are not static in their relationship but are in continuous intermingling motion. The assumption that any one component can be isolated, even for analytical inspection, without regard for the other four leads inevitably to further related arbitrary separations in language study. Socio-political implications of decontextualization are also evident. Those who invest the written word with the power of revealing meaning to the exclusion of situational, personal renderings of meaning are upholding the authority of the printed documents of society over those who might otherwise question the traditional culture. (Eleven references are appended.) (MM)

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THE FALLACY OF DECONTEXTUALIZATION

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"Life is like a pit full of snakes -- anything may be seen as part of the context to something else, and none of it stays still for a moment." (Britton, 1982, p.130). So it is with written language, in which writer, content, reader, and meaning are intertwined so inseparably, yet fluidly, within the writhing morass of intertextuality that physical isolation of one component can seriously lessen the perception of the whole. Imagine any one of the five facets without the other four and the symbiosis becomes clear. Yet, since the time of Plato and Aristotle, lengthy debates have occurred to establish not only what is knowable but also the locus of meaning in whatever is knowable. In the study of written language, one focus of this controversy is the concept of decontextualization.

Almost as if to disprove the idea for which it stands, the word itself resists clarification by a simple definition; each encounter with it in written texts produces a slightly different revelation of meaning. Jerome Bruner, referring to literacy in the classroom, equates 'decontextualization' with 'abstractedness' (Bruner et al, 1966, p.2). Jack Goody uses the term with ambivalence; his first reference shows a conscious awareness of the inadequacy of the designation:

> Morphemes can be removed from the body of the sentence . . . and set aside as isolated units capable not simply of being ordered within a sentence but of being ordered outside this frame, where they appear in a very different and highly 'abstract' context. I would refer to it as a process of <u>decontextualization</u>, even though the word involves some contextual difficulties. (1977, p.78)

Obviously, a "different and highly 'abstract' context" is still a context; herein lies the difficulty with accepting Bruner's definition (above) as well.

A reappearance of the word later in Goody's text betrays an even stronger discomfort with its use:

> It is not so much the making of plans, the use of symbolic thought, as the externalizing and communication of those plans, transactions in symbolism, that are the marks of man. And it is precisely this kind of activity that is promoted, transformed, and transfigured by writing, as a moment's observation of the list making activities of one's close kin or associates will confirm. It represents one aspect of the process of decontextualization (or better 'recontextualization') that is intrinsic to writing. (1977, p.159).

Compounding the difficulties already evident in the term 'decontextualization' with reference to written language, Walter Ong extends the use of the word to include readers and writers as well:

> • • • the original voice of the oral narrator took on various new forms when it became the silent voice of the writer, as the distancing effected by the writing invited various fictionalizations of the decontextualized reader and writer. (1982, p.148).

Although it is perhaps possible to argue that a fictionalized reader or writer is "decontextualized", it would seem more logical to assume that if a writer imagines a reader, it is in the context of interacting with the ideas of a text; if a reader conjures up an image of a writer, surely it is within the context of composing a text. David Olson also decontextualizes writer and reader from written discourse, asserting that texts are "unambiguous or autonomous representations of meaning" (1977,p.258), in other words, meaning is completely text-bound. Adding a new dimension to the idea of decontextualization, James Britton at the same time indicates the incomplete nature of the process, as well as implies a fundamental difference of opinion as to the independent meaningfulness of the text:

> If what a writer does when he draws from all he knows and selectively sets down what he wants to communicate is described as 'decontextualization', then the complementary process on the part of the

> reader is to 'contextualize', interpreting the writer's meaning by building it into his existing knowledge and experience (1982, p.57).

Significantly, Britton emphasizes the reader's active role in realizing the meaning of written discourse. While divergent, and even contrasting, interpretations of what a word signifies do not, in themselves, show it to represent a fallacious concept, they do weaken the arguments in which the idea plays a key role.

Before examining these issues, however, the construction of a working definition of 'decontextualization' which synthesizes as much as possible the various uses indicated above would be beneficial to an understanding of the implications of the concept. For the purpose of the ensuing discussion, then, the term 'decontextualization' will refer to the abstraction of a written text or portion of written text from all of its contexts, with the assumption that the isolated text, or portion thereof, is an autonomous container of its own meaning. Two major areas of contention immediately present themselves: can written discourse be rendered meaningfully context-free? and is the locus of meaning solely within the text? All of the other problems or concerns related to the idea of decontextualized language are aligned with one or the other of these two questions.

Can writing ever be 'decontextualized' in any meaningful sense? To answer that question, we must first consider a prior question: when we talk about 'context', what, exactly, are we talking about? There is, of course, the linguistic context which, in itself, is complex, involving the morphological, lexical, and syntactic functions of the language of the text; then there is the situational context, crucial to understanding the semantic aspect of the text; there is also the cultural context, necessary for incorporating the text

into the reader's "social reality" (Firth, 1935/1957, p.27); and, finally, there is the textual context, fundamental to understanding the relation of a particular text to the world of texts. In addition, there is a dynamic quality to context; it is constantly developing as the reader progresses through the text. In other words, the text itself contributes to its own context, both through its explicit elaboration and through the implicit premises, conventions, and assumptions which connect the writer to the distant reader. To consider language as decontextualized means to consider it removed from the totality of its contexts. Such an isolation, it will be shown, is theoretically impossible.

Even if we take just a word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph out of 'context', for whatever purpose, it will appear in the context of that purpose. It could be argued that this is a deliberate misunderstanding of what the word implies, that what Goody, Ong, and Olson really mean is that written discourse is out of, or away from (de-), the context of the real world, of the concrete, of the here-and-now, and into . . . but here's the rub, because if it is out of one context, it is, ipso facto, into another, more abstract, perhaps, but a context nonetheless. At the purely morphological level, the word itself simply does not work.

Nor does the idea it signifies work for several authorities in the field of language study. Linguist Ronald Carter writes:

> . . . language has been increasingly studied in context, that is, with reference to its uses, its interpersonal message, its styles, and varieties. It has been systematically investigated for its social, moral, and political importance (1982, p.5)

James Britton, scholar of language development, presents an image of concentric contexts of which his article (a perfect example of what Goody, Ong, and Olson

would classify as abstract, context-free, or decontextualized language) is the radiating centre:

> The need to write this article is a very small part of the need for the journal Education to appear at intervals: which is a part of the need of teachers to pool their ideas: which is a part of the general need for children to be educated at all (1982, p.14).

Emphasizing the contextual significance of all discourse, Sapir, linguistic anthropologist, speaks of both oral and written language as a tapestry of two interwoven strands, expressive and referential; whereas the referential is located in the context of the real world for utilitarian purposes, the expressive is learned "early and piecemeal in actual contexts, and it never loses its ability to revive the actuality of these contexts with all their colors and all their requirements" (Sapir, 1972). Adding further to the contextual nature of language, I.A. Richards, in The Philosophy of Rhetoric, establishes two contexts for the written word which interact to contribute to meaning: the literary context, by which he means the other words which surround it in any given context; and the determinative context, by which he means all the reader's associations with the word from previous encounters in other contexts. Linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin adds support to the idea that language should not be decontextualized for analytical study when he writes, "What we have to study is not the sentence in its pure or unattached form but the issuing of an utterance in a situation by a human being" (1975, p.138). Literary theorist Stanley Fish maintains that language not only should not but, moreover, can not be decontextualized:

> . . . language does not have a shape independent of context, but since language is only encountered in context and never in the abstract (my underlining), it always has a shape, although it is not always the same one (1980, p.268).

> A sentence is never apprehended independently of the context in which it is perceived, and therefore we [can] never know a sentence except in the stablized form a context has already conferred (1980, p.283).

Actually, as in most debates, it is possible to line up acknowledged experts as respected proponents of either side of the controversy. What is more important is what is educationally at stake here. An analogy for the decontextualization process can be found in certain types of scientific, empirical experiments conducted in laboratory conditions to find out how real children in real classrooms write. It is not an unreasonable assumption that educators who believe that truths about the fundamental nature of language learning will be revealed in such studies will also believe that measurements of this learning can be made using testing devices composed of 'decontextualized' words, phrases, and sentences. Even more potentially serious, without a firm commitment to the contextual imperative of written language, educational authorities may be seduced by self-fulfilling programmed instruction and workbook exercise kits, which might seem on the surface to operate within a linguistic context, but which create a highly questionable language learning context at the situational and cultural levels, and pay virtually no attention at all to the intertextual context. However, it is within the nature of being human that, when insufficient context is provided, we provide or 'create' a context which will render the situation or text meaningful. Using programmed materials, children will consequently create a context, but it will be a context related to an authoritative indoctrination into how to be proficient at learning language, by filling in blank after blank, except the most significant blank of all -- the link between what is done with language in the school and what has been and is being done with language, not only in the exterior world, but also in the textual world.

Recall the five components of written discourse mentioned at the outset: writer, content, reader, meaning, and intertextuality, not static in their rela-

tionship but in continuous intermingling motion. The assumption that any one can be isolated, even just for analytical inspection, without regard for the other four leads inevitably to further related arbitrary separations in language study. Susan Miller cautions against this phenomenon when she writes:

> The assumptions implicit in referring to the composing process -- that an identifiable, repeatable, and virtually context-free series of activities occurs when people write -- underlies many empirical studies that are conducted without reference to the texts written (Miller, p.222)

Consideration of the writing process apart from the texts it produces is not the only manifestation of this type of dichotomizing; H.G. Widdowson amputates literary discourse from the body of written language, and from all contexts other than its own existence, labelling it "deviant" and the rest "ordinary":

> Context, however, in ordinary language will include aspects of the social situation in which the utterance takes place and remarks that have gone on before; whereas in literature context consists of the verbal fabric alone . . . the effects of patterning over and above the patterns of the language code is to create acts of communication which are self-contained units, independent of a social context and expressive of a reality other than that which is sanctioned by convention. In other words, I want to suggest that although literature need not be deviant as text, it must of its nature be deviant as discourse. (quoted in Britton, 1982, p.54)

Stanley Fish would refute Widdowson's assertion by saying, "The difference [between ordinary and literary discourse] lies not in the language but in ourselves" (1980, p.109). All language is appropriate for either purpose; historical and contemporary conventions, intention, context, and reception will determine whether its use is 'literary'. These examples of potential fallout from splitting the interrelated facets of written discourse are indicative rather than exhaustive, but give sufficient warning of the practical and theoretical hazards inherent in the first issue raised in our working definition of decontextualization, the idea that language can be isolated meaningfully fron its contexts.

The other issue, the assumption that meaning is located wholly within the written text, has even further reaching implications. Fundamental to the Chomskyean view of linguistics and the New Criticism approach to literary analysis, the idea of autonomous text has influenced both theory and methodology in the teaching of reading and writing.

One of the most serious problems which arises from the idea that the text is the locus of meaning is that it encourages acceptance, sometimes even worship, of the orthodoxy of the book, of the sacred nature of the printed word, not to be pondered, questioned, debated, and considered, but to be received as law. Comparing writing with oral discourse, Walter Ong suggests that:

> Writing established what has been called 'context-free' language (Hirsch, 1977:21-23,26) or 'autonomous' discourse (Olson, 1980a), discourse which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse has been detached from its author. . . . There is no way directly to refute a text. . . . Texts are inherently contumacious . . . unresponsive to questions. (1982, p.78-9)

At one level, of course, Ong is obviously correct; written text cannot respond to questions and arguments in the same way that a person speaking can. On the other hand, what can be achieved by verbal interaction in the oral world can also be achieved, under differing spatial and temporal conditions, within the textual world: text can elaborate text; text can question text; text can agree or disagree with text. Also, speech can respond to text and text to speech: the former in debates, formal speeches, and discussions; the latter in letters to the editor and articles in journals, to cite just a few examples. A classroom in which students are actively engaged in discourse will provide opportunities for 'dialogue' with texts as part of the interpretive process involved in critical literacy.

This shared responsibility between reader and text for the rendering

of meaning is emphasized by Stanley Fish:

> Comprehension is an event . . . the actualization of meaning -- in terms of a relationship between the unfolding, in time, of a surface structure, and a continual checking of it against our projection (always in terms of the surface structure) of what the deep structure will reveal itself to be.(1980, p.48)

In contrast, David Olson rejects this idea of the interaction between reader and text for the creation of meaning (ignoring momentarily and arbitrarily the role of the writer) when he refers to a seemingly agentless transference of meaning into the text, a sort of immaculate conception:

> These effects [altered views of language and of rational man] came about, in part, from the creation of explicit, autonomous statements -- statements dependent upon an explicit writing system, the alphabet, and an explicit form of argument, the essay. In a word, these effects resulted from putting the meaning into the text.(1977, p.262)

Immediately, the question arises: who put the meaning into the text? And answering the question by reminding us of the interdependent, inseparable nature of the unity of discourse for revelation of meaning is James Britton. He writes, "The raw material of his [the reader's] own experience is shaped by the poem when he responds to it in much the same way as the raw material of the poet's experience took shape in writing the poem."(18) He goes on to discuss a specific poem about a particular family, expanding the experience of that one poem to patterns of feelings and experiences of families in a wider context, in poems and stories that could be "about anybody's mother or father or sister."(26) In other words, meaning is an event comprised of an experience or feeling of the writer composed into a content (poem) which is experienced by the reader who interprets it in the context of patterns of related experience and feelings in both the exterior world and the textual world.

What does this imply in terms of the classroom? David Olson explicitly

spells out one consequence of his point of view:

> Ideally, since the meaning is in the text . . . the decoding of sentence meaning should be treated as the endpoint in development [my underlining] not as the means of access to print as several writers have maintained . . . if the text is formally adequate and the reader fails to understand, that is the reader's problem. The meaning is in the text. (1977, p.276-7)

This statement opens a Pandora's box of issues related to the teaching of reading. One is the "misleading assumption that if one knows the form of an utterance one also knows its function" (Schafer,1981, p.8); for example:

> B has called to invite C, but has been told C is going out to dinner:
>
> B: Yea. Well get your clothes on and get out and collect some of that free food and we'll make it some other time Judy then.
> C: Okay then Jack
> B: Bye bye
> C: Bye bye
>
> B's first utterance is by form an imperative but . . . it functions in this dialogue not as an imperative but as a closing invitation and C's utterance agrees not to a command to get dressed . . . but to an invitation to close the conversation. (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973, p.313)

Susan Miller responds to another of the issues raised by Olson's assertion:

> To say the meaning is in the text is to exclude situational interpretation which is to prevent our questioning the mode of discourse as creator of message, as different ways of thinking, as different cultural gestalts (228);

and these, of course, are the essentials of language learning, in which the skill of decoding messages can only be considered as a means to an end, hardly an "endpoint". What Olson overlooks is the dialectic relationship between reader and text. The text performs its task by challenging the reader to bring to bear on it relevant contexts. Some texts give more guidance than others, in acknowledgment of the spatial separation of writer from reader, but other texts do not. For example, a highly specialized geology text can be "formally adequate" but the reader might be unable to construct the appropriate context required to understand it.

There is, in addition, a related issue, which Susan Miller points out: ". . . those within English who would refuse to define 'reading' only as decoding messages may nonetheless see 'writing' only as communicating a specific message to an absent reader" (223). This view of writing as a decontextualized container of message denies the potential of writing as a process of discovery, as a means of ordering the wonderful, terrible, tedious, or inspirational phenomena of existence, as a way into the interior workings of the mind. During a writing episode, whatever its function, any of these possibilities can assume ascendancy. Susan Miller (1983) provides a diagram of the writing event which involves the following: contexts -- cultural, historical, and situational; constituents -- topic, setting, scene, genre, and form; and choices -- grammatical, lexical, and graphic. She then writes:

> Any of the discrete items of the model may become the centre pf attention in a gestalt or field of vision. Consequently, to say that a written text embodies its writer's intention, or semantic meaning, is only partially to describe it. A writing is contingent on the shifts and reordering of priorities that writers consciously or intuitively make. (231)

When the communicating of a message is considered the prime function of classroom writing, but one of the other possibilities assumes priority for a writer, any one or combination of several scenarios could occur, from considering the writing dysfunctional to encouraging exploration of the discourse mode; the former reaction could prove to be crippling to the developing writer, the latter highly motivational. As Stanley Fish says:

> The difference in the two views is enormous, for it amounts to no less than the difference between regarding human beings as passive and disinterested comprehenders of a knowledge external to them and regarding human beings as at every moment creating the experiential spaces into which a personal knowledge flows. (94)

The socio-political implications are evident. Those who invest the written word with the power of revealing meaning to the exclusion of situational,

personal renderings of meaning are, in essence, upholding the authority of the printed documents of society over those who might otherwise question the traditional culture. There is no threat to authority when the text is the source and the teacher the dispenser of knowledge to passive recipients; there is, however, a constant need to question and reconsider current values when students are acknowledged creators of or contributors to meaning.

So far, however, this discussion of the concept of decontextualization, with its far reaching implications, has been itself somewhat 'decontextualized', in that it has examined both the word and the idea the word signifies as meaningful entities abstracted from the contextual situation within which the term or concept appears in the texts written by Goody, Olson, and Ong. This has been done with purpose: at the morphological level, it was demonstrated that the word was unsuccessful in fully realizing its prefix; at the semantic level, both aspects of the concept, that written language is context-free language and that writtenlanguage is the sole container of its own meaning, have been shown to be erroneous, or, at the very least, problematic assumptions. In that light, therefore, since the decontextualization of 'decontextualization' has indicated it to be a fallacious concept, it is necessary to look at the word in the context of its use, or the entire argument could be considered solipsistic.

All references to decontextualized language in Goody's The Domestication of the Savage Mind and Ong's Orality and Literacy, and to context-free, autonomous language in Olson's "From Utterance to Text" appear in the context of comparing oral discourse with written discourse. Goody sets out to demolish the extent of the dichotomy that he feels has been arbitrarily established between "savage" and "civilized" cultures, but in so doing creates, equally arbitrarily, a greater than necessary dichotomy between oral and written text. He writes:

> [Written] speech is no longer tied to an 'occasion'; it becomes timeless. Nor is it attached to a person; on paper it becomes more abstract, more depersonalized. . .. words assume a different relationship to action and to object when they are on paper than when they are spoken. They are no longer bound up directly with 'reality'; the written word becomes a separate 'thing', abstracted to some extent from the flow of speech, shedding its close entailment with action, with power over matter. (44-46)

Few would disagree totally with assertions made in the first half of that statement; in those respects, as in several others not referred to, speech is definitely different from writing. However, the latter pronouncements are open to question. If Shelley's "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" is not sufficient refutation for the idea that the written word sheds "its close entailment with action, with power over matter", consider the weight of argument provided by the basic idea behind Proust's Remembrance of Things Past with respect to Goody's view that the written word is "no longer bound up directly with 'reality'":

> Living experience cannot be fully significant because it is isolated and transitory; it becomes significant only when it is contemplated in connection with those parts of the pattern which Time separates, but which really belong together.(Proust, 1932, Intro.)
>
> • • • truth will begin only when the writer takes two different objects, establishes their relationship • • • and encloses them in the necessary rings of a beautiful style, or even when, like life itself, comparing similar qualities in two sensations, he makes their essential nature stand out clearly by joining them in a metaphor, in order to remove them from the contingencies of time, and links them together with the indescribable bond of an alliance of words. (Volume II, p.1009)

The fundamental question in the search for 'truth' and 'reality' is basically the same as in the search for 'meaning': are 'reality', 'truth', and 'meaning' autonomous entities passively received, or situational, contextual events actively created?

David Olson, by locating both truth and meaning within the written text, which communicates its message to the receptive reader, provides his answer to the question:

> If one could assume that an author had actually intended what was written and that the statements were true, then the statements would stand up under scrutiny. • • • The task of the writer is to create autonomous text, relying on no implicit premises or personal interpretations. (268)

Conventions alone dictate that implicit premises will be part of any act of speech or writing, and denying the act of personal interpretations is reminiscent of King

Canute's flogging the waves. However, Olson does qualify his assertions by admitting the impossibility of perfect explicitness, saying it is a "goal rather than an achievement."(275) In so doing, though, he undercuts his theory of autonomous, context-free text considerably.

Also contrasting the world of abstract, decontextualized texts with "the old, oral, mobile, warm, personally interactive lifeworld of oral culture" (80) is Walter Ong, who writes:

> • • • real speech and thought always exist essentially in a context of give and take between real persons. Writing is passé, out of it, in an unreal, unnatural world. (79)
>
> By isolating thought on a written surface, detached from any interlocutor, making utterance in this sense autonomous and indifferent to attack, writing presents utterance and thought as somehow self-contained, complete. (132)

Ong, like Goody and Olson, presents the reader with two separate worlds: a world of oral discourse in which dialogue or communication is situational, interpersonal, and context-bound and a world of written discourse which is abstract, depersonalized, and context-free. There is a danger in dichotomizing so completely two modes of discourse; it is too easy to think of exceptional circumstances, or of situations combining speech and writing in interdependent contexts. For example, in a written text describing a context-bound oral situation, researchers Walker and Adelman relate the following conversational snippet:

> TEACHER: Is that all you've done?
> PUPIL: Strawberries! Strawberries! (quoted in Stubbs, 1983, p.112

A visitor in that classroom, hearing that verbal interaction, would not know what to make of it, and might not necessarily have the opportunity to ask for quite awhile, whereas the text soon after elaborates upon the dialogue: the teacher has said previously to the pupils that their work was "like strawberries --

OK as far as it goes, but it doesn't last long enough" (Stubbs, 112). It could be argued that this example demonstrates exactly what Goody, olson, and Ong maintain: that oral situations are implicit and context- bound, while written text is, of necessity, explicit, and not tied to context. A second look, however, opens the door to a contrasting interpretation: revelation of meaning was not dependent in either the classroom or the written text on the particular mode of discourse; it was, in both instances, dependent on the situational passage of time. Ong acknowledges the arbitrary nature of his dichotomy and qualifies it:

> • • • although texts are autonomous by contrast with oral expression, ultimately no text can stand by itself, independent of the extratextual world. Every text builds on pretext.(162).

It is evident that 'recontextualizing' the concept of decontextualization leads to the same conclusion reached when 'decontextualizing' it. Even the major adherents of the idea, Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and David Olson, have, at varying times, qualified their use of the term. Decontextualization is a flawed concept, is indeed, a fallacy. Rather than viewing writing as an isolated abstraction, we must acknowledge its ineluctable involvement with not only the human lifeworld but also the world of intertextuality. As Susan Miller writes:

> • • • the meaning or implication of writing -- both the act and the text -- is always larger than the boundaries of its origination purpose and situation. Written texts have and create their own worlds in which their writers as well as their readers enlarge and interpret their cultural contexts. The writer-in-process, as well as the reader, depends on cultural and textual histories. They are the broadest possible relevant considerations that provide motives to either writer or reader. (229)

Or, more succinctly,"A sentence is never not in a context. We are never not in a situation." (Fish, 284)

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